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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001559

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STATE FOR EB, PM, INL, S/CT, WHA/PPC, AND WHA/CEN
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SUBJECT: EMBASSY HIGHLIGHTS INADEQUATE PORT SECURITY AT
PUERTO CORTES; GOH FINALLY ADDRESSING ISSUE

Classified By: Ambassador Larry Palmer;
reasons 1.5(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On June 14, 2003, Honduras Desk Officer and PolOff met with Puerto Cortes Superintendent Antonio Cruz to discuss the problematic security situation at the port. Puerto Cortes is both the largest port in Honduras and on the Caribbean coast of Central America. Port officials acknowledged the lack of security and cited insufficient resources as the major impediment to compliance with the new U.S. Maritime Transportation Security Act, which requires ports exporting cargo to the U.S. to meet specific security standards and International Maritime Organization (IMO) regulations. Current security procedures at the port are virtually non-existent. During the meeting and a subsequent impromptu press conference, DeskOff underscored the importance of complying with new U.S. security regulations and emphasized that the onus is on Hondurans to make the necessary changes. Minister of the Presidency Luis Cosenza has designated Presidential Advisor Mauro Membreno as the GOH point person on this issue. END SUMMARY.

DeskOff/PolOff Meet with Puerto Cortes Superintendent

12. (C) On June 14, 2003, WHA/CEN Desk Officer for Honduras and PolOff met with Puerto Cortes Superintendent Antonio Cruz and Vice Manager Fermin Boquin to discuss the problematic security situation at the port. Port officials acknowledged the lack of security and cited insufficient resources as the major impediment to compliance with the new U.S. Maritime Transportation Security Act, which requires ports exporting cargo to the U.S. to meet specific security standards and IMO regulations. More worrisome, current security procedures at the port are virtually non-existent. During the meeting and subsequent impromptu press conference, DeskOff underscored the importance of complying with new U.S. security regulations and emphasized that the onus is on Hondurans to make the necessary changes. U.S.-donated counternarcotics canines, costing USD 35,000 apiece, are not currently being used to inspect outbound cargoes, and port managers were unable to enumerate in detail the specific procedures for inspecting containers. A Power Point presentation delivered by port officials offered a laundry list of resources needed for compliance, implying that the U.S. should fund these requests. When asked whether the U.S. was planning to fund the security modifications, DeskOff indicated that the U.S. would offer support of some kind but that the nature of the support had not yet been determined.

13. (SBU) Puerto Cortes is both the largest port in Honduras and on the Caribbean coast of Central America. It provides port services to companies from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, while serving as a distribution and manufacturing site for the surrounding agricultural regions from which over 1,800,000 containers on more than 1,700 ships were transported in 2002. Puerto Cortes can dock up to ten vessels at once. More than 1,000 ships travel from Puerto Cortes to the U.S. annually, and many others travel to Europe, Africa and South America. Puerto Cortes yielded revenues of approximately USD 81.4 million in 2002.

GOH Expresses Concern over Inadequate Port Security

14. (SBU) The unacceptable port security situation in Puerto Cortes finally captured the attention of the most senior levels of the Maduro government in late May. Minister of the Presidency Luis Cosenza met with EmbOffs to ask for U.S. assistance in addressing the problem. His request came in the wake of a sobering preliminary assessment (which included an estimated USD 1-3 million price tag for the minimum security improvements to meet the new legal requirements) from a private U.S. port security consultant who works with the International Maritime Organization. Cosenza's request and designation of Presidential Advisor Mauro Membreno as the GOH point person on this issue are encouraging signs that the GOH is finally going to treat this issue as high priority.

GOH Slow to Act But Headed in Right Direction

15. (C) Comment: Cosenza and Membreno's willingness to take control of the issue is a very welcome sign of the serious political will needed to tackle this difficult issue. Membreno's reputation as a highly capable and well-connected political fixer renders him a good choice for the position. At the same time, Membreno is regarded as a charter member of the dark side of the Nationalist Party. He will need those credentials in order to tackle vested interests within his own party, such as Vice President Diaz Lobo, and the port labor union if the GOH is to make the necessary changes for Puerto Cortes to be certified under the new U.S. Maritime Transportation Security Act. The GOH finally seems to understand that fixing the port's security is not as simple as getting U.S. Customs to open an office at Puerto Cortes. This is critical since the new U.S. law will impose a complete shutoff of shipping to the U.S. from any port that is not certified by July 1, 2004. End Comment.
Palmer